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Argentina: Current Prospects for Leftist Terrorism

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The recent extradition from Brazil to Buenos Aires of Montonero terrorist leader Mario Firmenich has again focused public attention on the danger of a resurgence of leftist terrorism in Argentina. Terrorism by the left has been a persistent source of political instability in Argentina and has played a central role in undermining the authority of both military and civilian regimes. President Alfonsin's tough response to the first inklings of terrorist reorganization shows, in our view, that he understands the gravity of the potential threat. For this reason—and because most of the radical leftists doubt that the current political climate is suitable—we foresee little chance of serious terrorism emerging over the next six months.

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Return of the Montoneros

The Montoneros, who first emerged in the late 1960s, have long sought to convert Peronism into a movement of the revolutionary left. After Juan Peron's death in 1974, the Montoneros clashed openly with the Peronist Party's conservative leadership and were expelled from the movement by his widow and successor, Isabel. The Montoneros continued to struggle for what they termed "authentic Peronism," becoming one of South America's largest, wealthiest, and deadliest terrorist groups. Nevertheless, they were crushed after the military coup of 1976. The few Montoneros who were not killed or captured by the armed forces were forced into exile, where they launched a largely ineffectual propaganda campaign against the military.

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t there were approximately 300 Montoneros in the country and some 500 abroad, although we believe these figures were somewhat inflated.

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numerous Montoneros returned to Argentina in the months following the election in October 1983 of the new civilian government. If they expected any lenience from the authorities, however, it did not materialize. Alfonsin, who personally abhors terrorism and needs to hold the left accountable for its crimes if he is to successfully prosecute the military for its excesses during the antiterrorist campaigns of the late 1970s, took a tough stance regarding the Montoneros. Two top Montonero leaders, Ricardo Obregon and Oscar Bidegain, were arrested soon after they returned to Buenos Aires in December 1983, and Firmenich has remained in custody since his extradition from Brazil in October 1984. Moreover, public statements by government officials indicate that Alfonsin—despite cutbacks in military spending—intends to preserve the military's ability to monitor terrorist capabilities.

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Internal Divisions

In our view, these arrests dealt a severe blow to the Montonero movement and have hindered its efforts at reorganization. With their most experienced leaders in prison or in hiding, the Montoneros' once-solid chain of command has broken down.

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two basic currents have emerged: a relatively moderate majority faction loyal to Firmenich and a number of splinter groups more prone to violence.

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The Firmenich faction has publicly abjured violence, asserting that the Montoneros will now concentrate on electoral politics. Before his arrest, Ricardo Obregon announced the dissolution of the Montoneros as an armed force and their reconstitution as the Authentic Peronist Party.

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however, that instead of forming an independent party, the Montoneros have attempted to infiltrate the regular Peronist movement's radical left wing, the Peronist Intransigence and Mobilization (IMP) faction. The IMP is headed by Peronist Senator Vicente Saadi, a well-known Montonero sympathizer whose newspaper, *La Voz*, was formerly subsidized by Montonero ransom money,

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We believe that the Montoneros' current goal is to gain full control of the IMP and use it to turn the entire Peronist movement toward the revolutionary left. The Montoneros are supplementing this strategy by infiltrating Peronist-controlled trade unions and rural cooperatives

We believe that the Firmenich faction's rejection of violence is only a tactical maneuver and that it would return to armed struggle under more favorable circumstances. The Montoneros have pledged in the past to work for peaceful change, but they quickly reverted to violence when conditions shifted. Furthermore, members of the group are rearming and continuing to train in terrorist tactics and guerrilla warfare. Recent public statements by Roberto Perdia and Fernando Vaca—the top Montonero leaders not in prison—have hinted at a resumption of violence if Alfonsin continues to "persecute" the movement.

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The immediate danger, however, stems from those Montoneros who question the leadership's cautious stance. Although not divided among themselves about other issues, such as leadership, they all doubt that the Montoneros can ever dominate Peronism and are eager to resume violence.

Reorganization of the ERP

Argentina's other significant leftist terrorist group is the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). In contrast to the vague populism espoused by the Montoneros, the ERP's ideology is rooted in Trotskyite Marxism-Leninism and has drawn inspiration more from Castro and Mao than from Peron. Emerging concurrently with the Montoneros, the ERP was smaller and was concentrated in Argentina's interior provinces, where it conducted sporadic rural guerrilla warfare until the late 1970s. Like the Montoneros, the group was ravaged by the military's post-1976 crackdown.

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he ERP lost 85 percent of its cadre and close to 95 percent of its weapons, safehouses, and vehicles during that period

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Press reports indicate that remnants of the ERP—probably no more than 100 persons—returned to Argentina in the wake of the election of Alfonsin. As with the Montoneros, the group split into moderate and radical factions. Unlike the Montoneros, however, the ERP appears to be fairly well organized and cohesive, and it follows the orders issued by exiled leaders in Nicaragua.

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the exiled ERP leaders—chief of whom is Enrique Gorriaran—have declined to return home because they believe that Alfonsin would have them arrested just like the Montonero leaders.

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The ERP is reportedly seeking to expand its political base by infiltrating the small but influential far-left Intransigent Party (PI). The ERP has chosen the PI because the two groups are ideologically compatible and because the ERP wants to avoid competing with the Montonero penetration of the Peronists. The ERP has also been active in a handful of leftist labor unions and some of Argentina's human rights organizations. Its overall success in these efforts is unclear,

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We share the judgment the ERP's long-term goal is to return to armed struggle. In the meantime, however, the group's more moderate sector has effectively reined in unruly elements who want to initiate violence immediately. Recently, for example, exiled leaders reportedly denied permission for an ERP cell to recover arms from a cache established in the late 1970s. While reassuring as to the movement's short-term intentions, this may indicate that the ERP retains at least a rudimentary capability to undertake

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Enrique Gorriaran Merlo

An Argentine of Basque origin, Enrique Gorriaran, about 42, is the ranking leader of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). One of the founders of the ERP in 1970, Gorriaran was arrested one year later and imprisoned in southern Argentina. In 1972 he escaped to Cuba, but the following year he returned to Argentina to participate in the ERP's rural guerrilla campaign. By the late 1970s Gorriaran was the leader of the ERP's military wing, which attacked businessmen and labor leaders and assassinated police and military personnel. Following the 1976 military coup, he fled the country and resurfaced in Nicaragua, where he fought alongside the Sandinistas. Gorriaran led the hit team that assassinated former Nicaraguan ruler Somoza in Paraguay in 1980, *He currently lives in Managua.*

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Mario Eduardo Firmenich

Mario Firmenich, 36, is on trial in Buenos Aires for kidnaping and homicide. One of the founders of the Montoneros, Firmenich gained notoriety in the early 1970s for his involvement in two bold terrorist acts: the kidnap/murder of former Argentine President Pedro Aramburu and the kidnaping of two Argentine businessmen, which resulted in a record ransom of $60 million. After the 1976 military crackdown, he moved abroad and tried to mobilize support for the Montoneros in Latin America and Western Europe. Firmenich provided logistic support for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas during the insurgency that overthrew President Somoza and remains friendly with Sandinista leaders. In 1981 was involved in smuggling Cuban arms to El Salvador.

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terrorism if it decides to abandon its current policy of relying solely on political infiltration

ERP-Montonero Contacts

The ERP and the Montoneros have begun to set aside longstanding ideological disputes and work together. Representatives of the two groups held a meeting in Cordoba Province in April 1984, according to press reports, Gorriaran and Perdia met in July to discuss the possibility of rescuing Firmenich. the two groups have agreed to cooperate in infiltrating labor unions. The political organizations with which the Montoneros and the ERP are linked have also been moving closer together: the IMP and the PI are trying to coordinate efforts to politicize and manipulate several human rights groups.

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Foreign Support

Although ERP-Montonero collaboration may ease logistical barriers—such as the lack of sufficient weapons and funds—to a resumption of terrorism, in our view, the radical left would still require considerable foreign support before it presented a serious threat to Argentine democracy. At present prospects for such aid are dim:

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- The PLO, which previously trained and funded the Montoneros, refused appeals for renewed aid in mid-1983,
- Mexican officials are terminating safehaven arrangements and government jobs they formerly provided exiled Montoneros,
- The Cubans, want to ingratiate themselves with Alfonsin and will therefore use their considerable influence over the Montoneros to discourage terrorist acts the Cubans may be trying to restrain the ERP in similar fashion.
- Remaining ERP and Montonero contacts with the Sandinistas and with various South American terrorist groups are not likely to compensate for the lack of substantial Cuban and East Bloc backing.

Outlook

We believe that the ERP and the Montoneros will concentrate on political activity for at least the next few months. Both groups recognize that, in the wake

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of the terrorist bloodletting and military repression of the 1970s, there is scant popular support in Argentina for political violence. And the Alfonsin government's arrest and prosecution of Montonero leaders has sent a clear message to the left that a return to terrorism will bring swift retribution.

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The Montoneros will not, in our view, succeed in wresting control of the Peronist movement from the center-right. Senator Saadi and the IMP faction have recently suffered a series of setbacks and appear to be losing status within the party. At best, the Montoneros can hope to retain a voice in the Peronist movement left via the IMP or, if the movement splits, dominate a small independent radical Peronist faction. The ERP has slightly better prospects for expanding its political influence through the Intransigent Party. The PI did well in recent student elections, and polls show that it could become a vehicle for the expression of leftist discontent with Alfonsin. The party lacks a national structure and following, however, and its radical ideology has historically prevented it from attracting more than 5 to 10 percent of the electorate.

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Although leaders of both the ERP and the Montoneros are likely to be preoccupied with political machinations over the coming months, the possibility of violence by dissident elements of either organization cannot be discounted. Such evidence is more likely in the case of the Montoneros, where discipline appears to be weaker. We believe that the Montoneros' radical fringe does have the capability to conduct kidnapings and assassinations. Such actions could be triggered by further arrests of terrorist leaders, a harsh verdict in the trial of Firmenich, or provocation by rightwing terrorists. But we also believe that, under present circumstances, such leftist violence can be contained by the security forces.

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